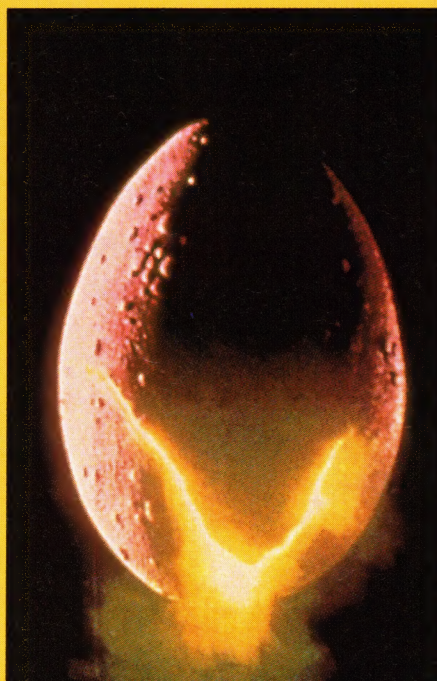


If an alien monster pops out of your chest, or you've got a nasty manifestation of devil dogs in your fridge, who you gonna call? In space no one can hear Martyn Clayden drool as he interviews everybody's favourite *Ghostbusting*, Alien-bashing heroine, Sigourney Weaver.

To most dedicated film and video viewers, Sigourney Weaver is Warrant Officer Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* movies. To further cement that association of performer and character, the emergence of the eagerly awaited third and final (?) chapter of that nightmare in space, *Alien 3*, on video should ensure Sigourney's deification in the Sci-Fi Hall of Fame.

But although the butch Ripley has had to fight every step of the way to gain even minimal recognition for her talent, good looks, and achievements in a male-dominated future world, Ms Weaver's background is a lot less thorny.

A native New Yorker, she was born on Fifth Avenue as just plain old Susan Weaver, the daughter of former NBC

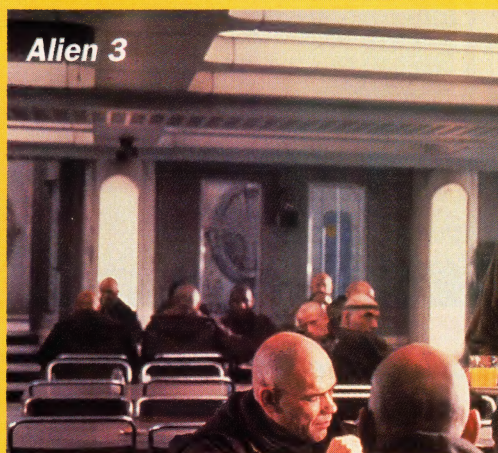


have been harmful to her prospects to be associated with a comedy that scooped four Oscars.

Her upbringing had left her with an aristocratic build and air that she tried, and still tries, to play down, and it was partly for that reason she accepted the role in *Alien* (1979) for a mere \$30,000.

Ridley Scott's magnificently moody horror story became an instant classic for several reasons. It had one of the scariest monsters in cinema history, it contained the infamously gory chest-bursting scene which Scott sprung on his actors unannounced, and it featured a strong woman taking the lead in the predominantly macho sci-fi genre:

"I was spoiled," Sigourney smiles,



boss of the Fifties Sylvester (Pat) Weaver and his British actress wife Elizabeth Inglis.

As their parents were fans of the Roman empire, Sigourney's brother was christened Trajan and she narrowly avoided becoming Flavia. Still, maybe she felt it was preferable to Susan, since she renamed herself (after an unseen character mentioned in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*) when she reached her fourteenth birthday.

Signs of her legendary calm self-assurance and steely resolve showed early, and carried her through Stanford University, and the Yale Drama School. Her only grievance during her adolescence was her Amazonian height, which she reached around 13:

"It was quite excruciating," she complains cheerily. "I was one of

those classic tall girls who bumped into everything and knocked everything over, so it took me a long time to catch up to my height".

Her first acting job was as an understudy in Sir John Gielgud's production of *The Constant Wife*, starring Ingrid Bergman, which toured the country before settling on Broadway. Naturally, Sigourney wasn't going to hang around in the wings for long, and she both starred in and occasionally co-wrote a string of plays penned by her former Yale pal, Christopher Durand.

After receiving a Tony award nomination for *Hurlburly*, she then thought about branching out into movies. Contrary to popular opinion, her screen debut was a bit part in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977). She may not have garnered accolades, but it can't

"because I was playing such a strong, interesting woman. I was not put in the position of having to go to bed with someone in the second reel because that was what the story demanded. And I won't be what I call a satellite to the male lead".

Powerful sentiments, but she still attracted a small degree of criticism from some of her female fans for the last scene in the film where the creature watches her strip down to T-shirt and knickers. What the audience didn't know was that the original script called for a greater degree of explicitness, which Sigourney was fully behind:

"There was supposed to be nudity at the end, which I thought would underline even more the difference between the vulnerable human and the dirty, hostile environment with the alien in its midst. The alien would see this pink thing emerge from a dirty green suit and it would be transfixed. But the company were worried they'd

lose the Spanish and Italian markets, so I ended up in my underwear”.

If she was expecting a flood of juicy scripts to drop through her letterbox as a result of *Alien*'s success, she was cruelly disappointed. It was another two years before she returned to the screen opposite William Hurt in

Eyewitness (1981, a.k.a. *The Janitor*). Here, Weaver was a glamorous TV reporter investigating a murder that janitor Hurt claims to have witnessed in order to get close to her. Cue the villains to dispatch the pair of them ...

The film's indifferent box office returns seemed in danger of labelling

Sigourney a one-hit wonder until Australian director Peter Weir chose her to star alongside Mel Gibson in *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1983).

Mel was a tough journalist in Sixties Indonesia, then ripe for Communist takeover, who enlists the help of diminutive cameraman Billy

Weaver's World



Alien 3



Kwan (Linda Hunt) while pursuing a romance with British attache Sigourney. She drops him when he prints a story she has told him in confidence, but they get back together after Billy is killed.

The 'chemistry' was fine between Ms Weaver, Mel and Peter ("Mel was perfectly happy for me to wear four-inch heels if I wanted"), and film was warmly received by the critics. Weir had said of his female lead that, "She can make intelligence visible." But unfortunately she made a less than bright decision to follow this up with *Deal of the Century* (1983), an abysmal Chevy Chase farce about a small-time arms dealer trying to sell a deadly missile to a South American dictator.

Sigourney, looking suspiciously like a satellite to the male lead, is his partner in crime. But in retrospect she defends her choice of film as a way back to comedy: "Most of my grounding has been in comedy, but people always think I'm this real straight sort of actor, an earnest and forthright young woman who plays it all deadly seriously".

A year later she could back up her words with her funniest role to date as the possessed Dana Barrett in *Ghostbusters*. Ironically, her trademark self-confidence only truly asserts



Alien 3

Alien



itself in the film after the demon Zool has invaded her, and she offers all her sexy seductiveness to the barely resisting Bill Murray. She and the movie were an enormous hit, and finally brought her back to public attention.

As a result, she was offered three varied projects of contrasting importance. In *Half Moon Street* (1986) she played Dr. Slaughter (!), an American linguist and economist supplementing her meagre income by prostitution. Through one of her regular 'clients', Michael Caine, she becomes enmeshed in political intrigue and murder.

Although it was shrewd to choose a role where the supposedly independent woman was in fact enslaved by forces out of her control, lacklustre direction and a weak script caused the

film to nosedive, despite several scenes of Sigourney unclothed.

"Maybe some people would have shied away from the fact that there's a lot of nudity and hard language in the screenplay. But it didn't bother me," she commented at the time with her usual candour.

In 1985 she was cast as a scheming American advertising executive who cons archaeologist Gerard Depardieu (no, I couldn't believe it either ...) into using his discovery of a 2 million year-old woman for a perfume campaign in *A Woman or Two*. Gerard definitely came off the better of the two, but this new ruthlessness in Sigourney's persona was a facet she was to plunder very fruitfully in

later years.

At this stage she desperately needed another hit, so she returned to the scene of her greatest triumph, floating in space in the Nostromo's life-pod. Yet, although *Aliens* (1986) began where *Alien* ended, it's focus changed dramatically to sit squarely on Ripley's shoulders. This time she had to do battle with her worst fears, and there were a lot more of them. The recently restored 'Director's Cut' showed Ripley's shock at learning of the death of her daughter (who she'd last seen 57 years earlier), and played up her relationship with the young girl Newt.

This softer side of Ripley was needed to counterbalance a terrifyingly exciting shoot-'em-up rollercoaster of a movie that left the audience breathless with tension:

"I was working very hard when I was sent the script," she recalls, "and I skipped over a lot of the stage direc-

tions which went on and on about the guns! I didn't realise they were a star of the film until I got there and saw all that amazing hardware. I was a member of Handgun Control in America and I was astonished I was in this warlike picture. I was never comfortable with that aspect of it".

Nevertheless, it was box office bonanza time again, and this time she found tastier scripts more available. 1988 was an astonishing year for her, because she gave 2 remarkably evocative performances, as the spiky naturalist Dian Fossey in *Gorillas in the Mist*, and as the unscrupulous broker Katherine Parker who steals Melanie Griffith's best idea in *Working Girl*.

She particularly enjoyed working

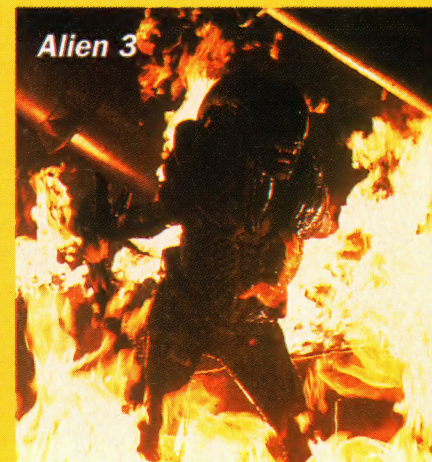
with the giant apes, with whom she displayed her own natural fearlessness. Not only did it start to stir her own maternal yearnings, but it made her very protective of Dian, who'd been brutally murdered by poachers:

"She was a complex subject who hated many people and burned down huts. But I didn't want to tell the story of a woman's descent into isolation and madness. I wanted to tell the story of who this woman was, what she loved, what she devoted her life to. She spent all her time getting people to understand that gorillas were not second class citizens, but an equal species".

The Academy were clearly impressed, because they nominated her for Best Actress for *Gorillas*, and as Best Supporting Actress for *Working Girl*. She didn't win either, but her fee started to shoot up.

In 1989 she returned to another old friend in *Ghostbusters 2*, a weaker vessel than the first, but one in which her screen child is threatened with possession by an evil spirit. The pressure to breed inevitably proved irresistible, and shortly after she and her theatre director husband Jim Simpson (whom she married after the first *Ghostbusters*) became the proud parents of daughter Charlotte.

The effect on her life has been quite dramatic, even when she was shaping her final reincarnation as Ripley for *Alien 3*. The prisoners on the prison planet where she crash-lands have no weapons, yet the alien on the loose has a special reason for preserving Ripley's life. There's a persistent underlying theme of motherhood in the film that Sigourney was keen to fos-



ter:

"I wanted to be as mother a long time before I was successful, and I just always wanted Ripley to have a normal life and not the tension of wanting the normalcy of life and not being able to have it. I think it was my line, 'I'm part of the family now' that was pivotal, because the irony of that was never lost on me as Ripley - the fact that she'd had this daughter she lost, and then another daughter she lost (Newt). If you're going to do a monster picture then it should be about that kind of intimacy, about the guts of life".

But you needn't worry if you think motherhood will make Sigourney a wimp: "I like playing women who are isolated from others," she insists. "Women who are aloof from society. I've never wanted to play wives and mothers - give me the role of a psychotic or a villainess any day! I'll miss playing Ripley, but there's only so much bad luck a female character should be allowed to have ..."

